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Sox Park

Bob Cengr

The boy's stomach hums with warm anticipation as his family's rusted AMC Gremlin rattles down Interstate 55. Driving on the expressway means either a family vacation at the Wisconsin Dells or a White Sox game, and today it is the second thing.

"Look over there," his father says, pointing. "See the lights? That's Sox Park." The boy sees the very tops of the light stanchions, but in his young mind he can't figure out how they connect to a baseball game.

"You see 'em?" his father says, and the boy nods because he is seven years old and his father is the smartest man in the world. The boy's father nods, too, and the boy knows he has given the right answer.

"Sox Park," his father says again, making the internal vowels sound like the hard edges of an unfinished concrete block at the local quarry. Technically the crumbling stadium at 35th and Shields is named after the miserly patriarch of Chicago's South Side baseball team. But the year is 1976 and it will be two decades before professional sports arenas are named after airlines and cell phone service providers, so if you say *Sox Park* to any group of people in Chicago they will definitely know the place you are talking about. There's simplicity in the two-syllable, seven-letter phrase that is perfect for this section of the city, where dads are cops, bartenders, or pipe fitters and moms are simply moms.

Before long the boy's father pulls the Gremlin into a small, graveled area owned by a local bail bondsman who lets Sox fans park there eighty-one days a year—partly because it is good PR, but also because sometimes the fans who park there wind up being his clients later in the day. The boy's father gives a guy in a grubby white undershirt an extra two bucks for a perimeter spot that will let them get out before anyone else and beat the post-game rush. Getting stuck in traffic makes his father yell things out the window like *Up yours!* and *Kiss my ass!*—things the father would never say at the dinner table in the company of the boy's mother. Even though his father has tipped the parking lot attendant, the boy knows they will not leave Sox Park until the final out has been recorded (on this point his father has been absolutely clear), and thus there will still be traffic and sweat and frustration and swearing and the boy smiles just thinking about it.

On the way to the park the boy and his father pass a souvenir stand selling merchandise from all 26 major league baseball teams, bright swatches of color standing out in shocking relief against this blue collar burg where Daley har-rumphed his way to power and Capone kneecapped his way past every enemy but syphilis and Royko's typewriter *click-clacked* so brilliantly that people were willing to look the other way when it came to his boozing. The boy sees the blood red hats of the St. Louis Cardinals; the martial gold-against-black of the Pittsburgh Pirates; and the maroon-and-white, loopy "P" of the Philadelphia Phillies with a baseball curled inside of it. Next come the food vendors, but the boy's father will smuggle in sandwiches and cans of pop because "These guys will rip you off any way they can" and "Why would I pay a buck fifty for a Coke, for chrissake?" The one expenditure the father will allow is a game program for 25 cents (miniature golf pencil included) so they can keep score and the boy can learn things like an error on the shortstop is recorded "E-6" and when a batter strikes out looking

you make a backwards K. Things you will never really need to know unless you are at a ballgame, but important things nonetheless.

Now the boy and his father walk through the turnstiles. Everything is immediately darker under the stands, and by the time the boy's eyes have kind of adjusted the two of them are climbing the steep ramp to the concourse and stepping into the sun once again. Although the blinding light hurts his eyes a little bit, the boy very much enjoys the sensory overload. The flouncy organ music at the ballpark is the complete opposite of the somber tones at church where the boy is surrounded by people so overwhelmed by everyday life that they latch onto words like *agape* and *Deuteronomy* just to get by. The organist plays "Runaround Sue," a fan favorite at Sox Park, and while the boy doesn't know all of the words, the parabolic chorus (*oh oH OH oH oh*) makes it easy to follow. If the boy listens hard enough, he notices an off-key echo coming from the left field bleachers that for some reason he connects to beer.

The boy and his father have seats behind the third base line about halfway between the playing field and the outside edge of the stadium. The two-tone, checker-board-mowed grass of the outfield stretches out in front of the boy like an unblemished, green future of making the Honor Roll and shoveling snow for the widow who lives down the block. At home, baseball is a sport boxed in by a hulking Magnavox, sharp-edged and hard-angled. A ball coming off the bat on a direct line toward one of the screen's upper corners will probably be a home run, while the infielders' throws in a 6-4-3 double play follow the neat and tidy lines of the roof on a house the boy might draw in second grade art class. At the ballgame today, the perspective is different—the boy feels like he is partly outdoors because he can see the sky, but partly indoors because there are walls that separate him from life outside the park. It's like the difference between watching the opening montage to *Love American Style* and going to see 4th of July fireworks live in person.

The boy's father opens up a crinkled brown paper bag and pulls out two sandwiches.

"Liver sausage or bologna?" he asks his son.

"Bologna," the boy says. The air smells like fried food and foamy beer and his stomach aches for a spicy ballpark sausage, but even at age seven the boy knows enough to accept the homemade sandwich and act as though he is happy to have it. Under his breath the boy starts to sing the lyrics *My bologna has a first name, it's O-S-C-A-R...* His father ignores him and points toward the left fielder, warming up with a Sox bench player who is standing in foul territory.

"See that guy over there? Outside the foul line?"

"What's he doing out there?" the boy asks.

"He goes out there every inning. He warms up the left fielder while the other two guys play catch." The boy nods his head, not feeling stupid for having to ask the question, in fact feeling kind of smart because he has correctly interpreted the phrase *the other two guys* to mean the center fielder and right fielder. Hearing the phrase *play catch* is enough to brighten the boy's already good mood.

"Watch when the guy warming up with the left fielder comes back to the dugout. See if he throws the ball into the stands." The boy pauses mid-chew and watches as the bench player jogs all the way over to the edge of the brick wall and hands the ball to a boy who looks even younger than seven.

"You see that?" The father says to the boy. "Why'nt you go down there—maybe you'll get a ball."

"Now?" the boy asks.

"No, not now. Next inning, when the Sox go out in the field again."

The game of catch has ended and the inning has begun. The Sox pitcher walks the first two hitters, eliciting grumbles from the boy's father, who sure as hell didn't shell out \$4.75 per ticket to see "some jackass making \$60,000 a year *walk* people. Just throw strikes, for chrissake," is all he asks. The pitcher then induces an infield fly rule pop-out and a double play and the fans applaud and the flouncy organ music is back. When the Sox come up to bat they get a lead-off double, but then make three quick outs and the inning is over.

"Now?" the boy asks his father.

"Yeah, now."

The boy walks quickly, but not too quickly because he needs time to figure out if he should be nervous or not. He walks past an usher wearing the navy blue suit and cap of an airline pilot, whose eyes are glazed over with more important things than preventing a seven-year-old from getting an honest-to-God souvenir. The boy has to look at the ground more than usual because the concrete steps leading down to the field are longer and flatter than the ones you find anywhere else—*tiers*, really, more than *steps*—but with every quick upward glance the field gets closer and closer. From here the green grass is a little more patchy than it looks from their seats, the infield dirt a little less smooth and a little more spike-marked. It's the longest walk through unfamiliar territory the boy has taken since walking to kindergarten just two years ago, yet somehow he arrives at the wall sooner than he expected to and there is a kind of hot tightness just below his belly that makes him wish he had gone to the bathroom earlier in the game. It takes the boy several moments to locate the Sox bench player with an extra baseball because the sightlines are totally different at this level. Turning his head all the way to the side, he sees the player casually firing the ball to the left fielder the way big leaguers do in person, the ball coming out of his hand with shocking velocity for such an easy motion. While the gentle arc in reality covers only 60 feet or so, to the boy it goes on forever.

Before the boy knows it the bench player is jogging toward him—toward the dugout, actually—and he gets bigger and bigger with every jog-step, his face pockmarked like the infield dirt. The thin, circus-font "Chicago" (all the letters look like they have elbows) on the front of the jersey is bigger than the boy expected. Even bigger is the pointed tab collar that gives the White Sox the look of a South Side, tavern-sponsored, 16-inch softball team.

"Here, here, HERE!" the boy yells because it is the only word he can come up with and a bolt of electricity shoots through his body when the outfielder makes eye contact and lobs the ball toward him. The red stitches rotate and the ball gets bigger and time seems to slow down until the ball is almost within catching range and then both the ball and time speed up and someone pushes the boy from behind and he bangs his chin against the concrete wall and loses sight of the ball altogether and then he is down. He cries out in pain and looks up to see the sky and a little bit of the upper deck above him. Once again, the sightlines are way off.

The boy lifts his head and tries to sort out all of his 7-year-old limbs. His eyes

sting with tears, but he fights them back because right now the idea of crying in front of people he doesn't know is scarier than a little blood on his chin.

Unfolding himself to full height, he sees an older, taller boy running up the steps, his arm outstretched above his head, his hand clutching the baseball that the White Sox bench player just threw into the stands. When the older boy gets back to the section that houses his seat, he high-fives several people in the row. He wears a pair of light blue jeans shorts and a black T-shirt with the sleeves cut off, his pale arms starting to show the curved hints of triceps. His father is a fat man in similar shorts and a white Old Style T-shirt, and after he high-fives his son, he says something the boy cannot hear. It must be funny, though, because the rest of the row laughs and it is at this point—with the combination of being knocked down and then laughed at—that the boy bursts into tears. He starts back up the tier-steps toward his seats, moving much faster than on the way down and not caring whether he trips and falls. But before the boy gets back to his seat he runs into his father, who grabs him by the shoulder, spins him around, and starts the trip back down toward the field.

And now things seem to be happening faster and clearer than they normally do. When the two arrive at the row containing the boy who took the ball that could have belonged, should have belonged, had to belong to the boy, his father horses his way down the knee-crowded aisle, using the bullish strength he has built up over a decade of moving furniture for a living. Several of the fans nearby yelp in protest, but the boy's father does not stop. When he gets to the boy with the cut-off t-shirt and faint triceps, he grabs the baseball, then turns and underhand tosses it to his son. The older boy looks more shocked than angry, and his fat father rises in protest.

"What the hell're you doing?" the fat man says

"That's my son's ball."

"Bullshit. He couldn't even catch the damn thing." Suddenly people in the row are laughing again and what makes it worse this time is that they are not only laughing at the boy, but also at his father. Sensing momentum, the fat man speaks to his own son.

"Johnny, go get your ball back."

And much like the boy starting to cry when the high-fiving began, it is at this particular moment that something deep inside the boy's father clicks, something primal, something about being dismissed as an empty threat, something about not being enough of a man to defend his own family, and once he feels the click the boy's father cocks his meaty right fist behind his ear and smacks the fat man in the face. The fat man stumbles backwards-sideways, one of his milky white knees bobbing toward the surface of the row as he falls. Three men seated nearby are suddenly on their feet, cluttering the tight space between the rows of seats. The boy's father strains against two of these men, the muscles in his neck taut like steel cables.

"How about that, you fat fuck?" the boy's father yells at the still prone fat man. "You think my kid could've caught that one?"

A cluster of Chicago cops arrives at the scene, pushing past the airline pilot-usher and herding the boy's father out into the open. Wrestling his hands behind his back, two cops snap a pair of handcuffs on the boy's father's wrists. "What the hell?" the boy's father yells. "You got the wrong guy!" A smattering of

applause from nearby fans turns the once tight stomach into a dull, cold ache. A third cop turns to look at the boy.

"Hey, pal, is that your old man?"

"That's my dad," the boy says quietly.

"Well, come on." The cop jerks his head toward the boy's father, who is being forcibly marched up the aisle. "You gotta come too."

Once everyone reaches the top of the steps, it is ballpark-entry-in-reverse as things go from very bright and overly green to dark again. The boy's eyes do not adjust immediately, so he can barely make out the silhouette of his father being snowballed down the interior ramp. At ground level the cops throw him into a small cell with a chain link fence as its outside wall. Initially the boy's father stumbles, then rights himself and pushes his face against the fence. Several strands of hair curl girlishly across his forehead and the boy wishes his father were not in handcuffs so he could push those strands back into place and make everything right again. His father's face is red, and angry spittle dribbles out of the corner of his mouth.

"Lemme out of here!" he yells.

The caretaker cop nudges the boy's shoulder.

"Come on, pal. A holding cell's no place for a kid." The two of them cross the walkway to a spot fifty feet away from their original location. While the boy can still see his father and hear his father, he can no longer interact with his father and the ache in his stomach grows even colder.

Before long four cops bring the fat man down the ramp. The boy thinks it is strange that they needed more cops to bring down the guy who got punched than the guy who actually *did* the punching, but maybe that's how it works. The fat father, now holding a plastic bag full of ice against his jaw, is led over to the holding cell. Although he cannot hear the conversation, the boy sees the cops and the fat man talking to the boy's father through the chain link fence.

"Fuck you!" the boy's father yells, and one of the cops walks over and mutters something to the cop who has been watching the boy. He in turn nods his head and leans down toward the boy's level and puts his hands on his knees, coming as close as he can to looking the boy straight in the eye.

"All right, pal, I'm gonna make a deal with you. Gimme that baseball, and we'll give it to the guy your old man punched in the mouth. You do that, and I'll let him out, free to go. Nobody goes to jail, and we can all go back to watching the game."

This seems like an easy decision to the boy—he doesn't even care about the baseball any more, he just wants his father out of the holding cell. He pulls the ball out from behind his back and starts to offer it to the cop when he hears his father yelling again.

"That's my son's ball!"

The boy freezes with the baseball halfway to the cop.

"Come on, kid, you don't want your old man to get arrested, do you?" The ball stays frozen, and the boy's father yells again.

"Goddamnit, stop talking to my kid!" The cop glances over his shoulder, then looks back at the boy.

"Look, pal, if you don't give me the ball, we're gonna have to book your old man. That means all kinds of paperwork, plus he spends the night in the clink."

The boy does not know what the word *clink* means, but given the situation he guesses it is an awful place to spend the night.

"How're you gonna get home if that happens? You want us to call your mom?"

"No," says the boy. And means it. The boy's mother could have come to the game today, but he is pretty sure that she decided to stay home because of older boys who push people down and fat men with milky white knees and cops who say *old man* when they're talking about someone's dad. The boy looks up at the cop and hands over the baseball.

"Thatta boy," says the cop. "You did the right thing."

Within minutes the boy's father is released and the boy is allowed to rejoin him and the two of them walk away from Sox Park, hours before the final out of the game will be recorded. His father has smoothed out his hair, but his wrists are red and chafed from the handcuffs.

"Why'd you give the ball to that cop?" the boy's father says. "Didn't you hear me yelling?" The boy says nothing, instead looking down at the stubborn, blue-collar grass that has fought its way through the sidewalk cracks because he knows he has let his father down and there is nothing he can say to change that. Then they are back in the Gremlin, rattling down the interstate towards his mother and a warm dinner. The boy lifts his bloodied chin and once again looks off into the distance for the lights of Sox Park, but this time he cannot see them.